DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 403 608 CS 509 406

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TITLE Meeting the Needs of Returning Adult Students in Forensics.
PUB DATE Nov 96
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (82nd, San Diego, CA, November 23-26, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Students; *Baby Boomers; Communication Skills; *Debate; Higher Education; *Learning Motivation; *Nontraditional Students; Persuasive Discourse; Public Speaking; *Student Needs; Student Participation
IDENTIFIERS Debate Tournaments

ABSTRACT

As the baby boomer generation moves into its late 30's and early 40's, the number of students returning to college older than 35 has increased, and is, in fact, one of the fastest growing student populations in higher education. Most adult students return to school for job-related reasons. Adult students participating in forensic programs do so for a variety of reasons, among those are requirements for teaching communication, improving their speaking skills, or the enjoyment of performing and competing. Coaches in forensics say that adult students have a positive influence on teams, partly because of their maturity and responsibility. Challenges to returning adult students include time constraints for attendance at practice sessions and meets, the chosen topics, programs not meeting their needs, and restrictions of some forensics organizations making competition prohibitive. Forensics programs should evolve to become available to all students. (CR)

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Meeting the Needs of Returning Adult Students in Forensics

by

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A paper presented at the 1996 SCA National Convention, SanDiego, CA

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Meeting the Needs of Returning Adult Students in Forensics

As the Baby Boomer generation moves into its late 30's and early 40's the number of students returning to college older than 35 years of age has increased. In fact, one of the fastest growing student populations in higher education is the returning adult student. According to Charles J. Andersen, for the American Council on Education in 1990, "Most explanations of higher education's enrollment growth over the last decade have pointed to increased numbers of older students. Indeed, the *numerical* increase of such students has been substantial; their numbers have grown from approximately 3.2 million in 1974 to 5.1 million in 1988" (p. 3). For purposes of reporting, Andersen defined "older students" as over the age of 25 years which is also consistent with the U.S. Bureau of the Census. The profile of the returning adult student is over the age of 24, generally holds a full-time job, has a family, and is generally female. Most adult students have returned to school for job-related reasons. Some need to complete a degree for job advancement, some are looking to change fields, while others are looking for personal enrichment. Whatever the reason, they have returned to school and some of these older students are finding there way into forensic programs. Because their needs and experiences are different from the traditional age student, the returning adult student can pose some interesting challenges for forensic coaches and programs as a whole. This paper will look at the propensity for adult students participating in forensics the benefits and detriments to this participation and the implications that this participation has for forensic programs.

Why would returning adult students be involved in a forensics program? For many students returning to complete a degree it is a requirement of the major. Students seeking teacher certification in

Communication are required to have a knowledge of forensics. Some schools meet this requirement through forensic participation. Other students may have an interest in improving their speaking skills, or an appreciation for literature which forensic participation would enhance. In fact, for adult students who have returned to school because they have to make oral presentations on the job, forensics would be a natural training ground. The forensic activity is an enjoyable social activity as well; and for adult students trying hard to fit in, forensics could provide that opportunity. Finally, as coaches we are aware that forensic activity is enjoyable yet competitive. The entertainment value of performing and watching others perform should not be underestimated. This enjoyment combined with a competitive component that keeps things exciting should draw students of any age to participate.

Should these students be involved with forensics? I believe the answer to this is a definite yes. Certainly the educational value of the forensic experience is not limited by age. Forensics can be the ideal way to introduce students to new technology in doing research as well as the above stated benefits to forensic participation. Yet, the adult education literature warns that returning adults may lack self-confidence and basic study and communication skills, especially female returning adult students (DiSilvestro, 1978; Berryman-Fink, 1982; Redding & Dowling, 1992). As educators, these concerns should not be reasons for preventing participation but encouraging forensic participation. There is no other co-curricular activity that can address communication skills, develop confidence and promote self-esteem as forensics. The nature of the activity teaches communication skills and the immediate, constructive feedback of judges and peers helps develop confidence and a positive self-esteem. The benefits of adult students participation in forensics is not just to the individual students but to the forensic team as a whole.

Because of age and life experience, returning adult students tend to be more mature individuals who understand the concept of responsibility. In informal surveys of coaches on the forensic circuit this year, coaches agree that adult students do tend to have a positive influence on the team. Coaches find their students looking up to the older students and their efforts in forensics, while also relying on the adults for leadership through tense times in competition or in social clashes on the team. Adults seem to be better able to handle competition and personality conflicts. While most of the comments from coaches

were positive, there was some questioning about the effect that some adult students have on the competitive nature of forensics.

While the competitive nature of forensics can make create motivation and enjoyment, it also fosters a desire to win. In order to win forensic competitions competitors need to conform to stylistic standards and presentational norms that many adult students find contrived and inappropriate for the presentation of their material. While adult students found winning rewarding it is not their main reason for competing. If adult students are not going to be winning many awards than some coaches have difficulty spending the money to take adult students to competitions. This is especially true if a program is reliant on success for funding. A couple coaches even admitted that they would discourage an adult student from participating in competition although they would not deny them the opportunity if they insisted. What seems to be affecting the appropriateness of adult student participation in forensic at this point is the differences between an academic model of forensic participation and a competitive model of participation. While both acknowledge the benefits of the other the emphasis of the programs are different. But even if adult students are welcomed to participate there are still other challenges that must be met.

The first challenge is time. Most returning adult students will find it difficult to return to school for extra practice sessions. With family and work demands there is little extra time. Any coaching must happen when the student is normally on campus. This requires that the coach be flexible in meeting times. This also means that the adult student may not be able to practice with other students and thus not get to knowmembers of the team. This can make the adult student uncomfortable and feel like an outsider when tournament time comes around. For team unity and group cohesion the coach needs to make the other students aware of the adult students before tournament time and make every effort during tournament trips to include the adult student in the discussion and team activity.

A second, and perhaps more significant challenge is meeting the needs of the adult student. While some students are involved because it is a requirement, others are involved because of their enjoyment of literature, or to become better speakers. Most adult students are very grounded in reality.

As mentioned above, they will see little use in over acting an interpretation piece or memorizing an informative on a topic they do not see as useful. In my experience with adult students in forensics, they seem to prefer oral reading to oral interpretation and choosing speech topics that they have had experience with at work or at home whether or not they meet the standard for tournament award winning. The fact that the students are preparing and competing in a tournament does meet some of the educational benefits of forensics; but the lack of reward can discourage adult students from further participation and getting the maximum benefit from the forensic experience. Since traditional students and coaches can learn from the experiences and viewpoints of the adult student, to discourage their participation because the current trend in competition discriminates from meeting adult student needs is indeed unfortunate at the least. I am not sure of a solution to this challenge. Perhaps tournaments could experiment with offering an oral reading event. But this does not directly address the problem. Judges need to be more sensitive to topic and program choice. We seem to get stuck in trends that stifle creativity. Not all styles are appropriate for all students.

The competition challenge leads to the third challenge, tournament attendance. Because of family and work related responsibilities tournament attendance is frequently difficult and over night stays impossible (especially when dealing with single parents). One day tournaments are usually more feasible options but this requires advance planning on the part of the student. Coaches need to make tournament dates available as soon as possible so that parents can make childcare arrangements or request off from work. While some tournaments do provide childcare for the children of coaches the practicality of having to provide childcare for competitors could become problematic especially if the number of adult students is increasing. Hosting a tournament on your campus is often an easier way to give the adult student tournament experience without having to travel. I believe the tournament experience to be a valuable part of the forensic experience. Therefore, I try to make tournament travel as easy as possible for the adult student. Fortunately, we are located in a area that has tournaments throughout the year within an hour to two hour drive. This allows the adult student to arrive on their own when their bracket is competing and to leave when they're finished. This shortens their day and makes family arrangements easier. The price

that I pay is a lack of interaction between the adult and traditional students. Each can learn from each other's experiences. I also have to make it clear from the start that this option of tournament attendance is only open to adult students. The traditional students must travel with the team and I prefer the entire team to travel together.

Family commitments are not the only barrier to tournament competition. The participation restrictions of some forensics organizations make competition prohibitive for returning adult students. For example, the CEDA By-laws require that a student be "registered as a bachelor or associate degree seeking student" and "not in possession of a bachelor's degree." Many returning adults are not degree seeking but seeking a certificate in a field (such as education) and some may already have a bachelor's degree in another field. The National Forensic Association has a similar restriction on participation although makes exceptions for students who required to participate as part of a class. But even if these students qualify for the National Tournament they can not compete. While the reasons for having these restrictions are clear it would seem that exceptions could be made for students who are returning to school who have never previously participated in forensics.

As our student population shifts to an older age group and as the younger age group finds it more and more necessary to work at jobs outside of school, forensic programs and tournaments are going to be faced with new challenges to meet the needs of the student. We will have to experiment and learn to evolve with our students so that the educational value of the forensic experience can be made available for all our students.

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